

## **Muscular Christian Themes in Contemporary American Sport: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

Muscular Christianity is often credited as being influential in Western sport ideology but is rarely mentioned in contemporary analysis. This paper identifies instances of muscular Christian ideals, as defined by Thomas Hughes, observable in the contemporary American sport context, addressing the continued religious impact of sport. Muscular Christian themes were identified in various media, including, online videos, magazines, books, and commercials involving American cyclist Lance Armstrong. Two of Hughes' themes were observable in the media portrayal of Armstrong: a body used for the protection of the weak and a body used for the advancement of all righteous causes. These findings suggest that themes Hughes identified as muscular Christian continue to operate in the contemporary American sport context, observable through media portrayals of athletes.

### **Introduction**

Contemporary American sport culture is a site for religious and spiritual discourse, where issues of good versus bad, right versus wrong, and ideal versus less-than ideal have become justifiable topics of conversation (Aitken, 1992; Eitzen, 2001; Feeney, 2005; Ingham, Loy, and Swetman, 1979). This study aims to display sufficient evidence supporting the claim that sport celebrities, in this case Lance Armstrong, often display historical muscular Christian themes supporting claims in contemporary American popular culture that sport is an important social and moral learning activity. This study examines the hegemonic Judeo-Christian ethical and value laden ideals in the contemporary American sporting culture, and how the norms and ideals established in the works of nineteenth century muscular Christian authors persist in the ways contemporary American sport culture perpetuate them.

Writing on the shift of religious themes outside of traditional religious spaces, Wuthnow (1988) argued that between the 1970's and 1980's in the United States, "the New Religious Right shifted the symbolic boundaries by redefining issues that previously had been matters of personal morality. These redefinitions reflected the distinction between private and public morality as well as the relationship among morality, religion, and politics" (Wuthnow, p. 207). Tony Ladd and James Mathisen (1999) suggest "these private-public moral boundaries were redefined within sport" as well (p. 208). On a daily basis, millions of Americans consume sport ideals through their televisions, radios, and computers following their favorite sports teams in the seemingly endless array of athletic contests. According to ESPN corporate fact sheets (<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/news/story?page=corporatefactsheet>): ESPN on ABC broadcasts 500 hours of sports each year, ESPN has more than 5,100 live and/or original hours of sports programming presented each year, and *Sports Center* on ESPN claims to have 88 million viewers per month (over 1 billion per year). As technology keeps pace, Americans get up-to-the minute information on games, happening in real time, on their personal digital assistants (PDA). Billions of dollars are spent every year attending sporting contests, while the staggering salaries of professional athletes continue to eclipse previous contracted earnings. In 2011, the New York

Yankee baseball team spent total \$196,854,630 paying its players. The top seven players on the team earned \$10 million or more, per season (<http://espn.go.com/mlb/team/salaries/>). Sport today is certainly a highly valued aspect of millions of American lives, some even say spiritually and religiously significant. To better understand the implications of such a popular cultural activity, it is imperative to understand the values these activities are premised on.

As millions of Americans continue to consume sport at staggering rates, the moral and ethical ideals of sport are broadcast and absorbed at an equal pace. Matters of moral behavior, ethical dilemmas, and related notions of success ideology are voiced by journalists, authors, news anchors, pundits, and any person with access to the Internet who can comment on the American sport context raises issues that, when studied, clearly demonstrate a unique kind of “hidden dependency” on muscular Christianity as John MacAloon (2006) suggests. Evidenced through the writings of Thomas Hughes, Charles Kingsley, and other mid-nineteenth century British thinkers, a muscular Christian view of sport was to make the “bad of society good” (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999, p.13). And thus the athletes who embodied and demonstrated these values were to be of high moral Christian character. This article examines two historic muscular Christian themes, observable in contemporary American sport culture, involving American cyclist Lance Armstrong. The evidence discovered in many popular cultural sources leads me to suggest contemporary American sport and its athletes continue to embody and reflect central muscular Christian themes.

As mentioned above, John MacAloon suggests that while muscular Christianity is no longer a widely understood or discussed topic, the ideological structures established over 150 years ago in Britain are still observable in the contemporary American sport landscape. For instance, Lance Armstrong is heralded for his grit and toughness (a highly important muscular Christian ideal). For example, Thomas Hughes, one of the foundational authors of the muscular Christian movement, published *The Manliness of Christ* in 1879 discussing this very topic. MacAloon argues that one of the central efforts for muscular Christians was to prove that “Jesus was a tough guy” (MacAloon, p. 689). It is clear to see this “toughness” credential of muscular Christianity as one of the underlying ideologies of contemporary American sport, in that training is tough and sport is a struggle for dominance (in essence a fight to win). To be successful in athletics (and in life) one must endure hardships. Such was the case with Lance Armstrong, who “won his tough guy credentials in 1999 after winning the Tour de France after surviving cancer” (Ruibal, 2004). Muscular Christianity was also premised on the notion that the moral value of sport also lay in the transfer of such values to life beyond the playing fields (Mangan, 1991; Putney, 2003).

Six muscular Christian characteristics informed this study, of which I specifically address two in the case of Armstrong. These values are found in *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), where Hughes states muscular Christians:

hold it to be a good thing to have strong and well-exercised bodies...that a man’s body is given to him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of

the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men (Hughes, 1861, p. 83).

Today, MacAloon suggests the “ethos” of muscular Christianity’s “reflections and representations are all around us and so normalized (usually but not always under secular rubrics) that it fails to stand out as anything unusual” (p. 692). This current article will briefly discuss how *a body used for the protection of the weak* and *a body used for the advancement of all righteous causes*, two muscular Christian themes from Hughes, that are still observable in contemporary American sport culture. I have taken MacAloon’s description of the underlying muscular Christian moral framework in contemporary American sport ideology and expanded, offering a sample case study of how this dependency on muscular Christian ideology continues to exist and evolve in the commercial figuration of Lance Armstrong and manifestations through his LIVESTRONG organization. Using popular cultural artifacts such as books, commercials, online media, magazine and newspaper articles, and “for-cause” events (i.e. ways in which people display and identify with Armstrong), his portrayal as a cancer survivor and cycling champion reinforces notions that he is an exemplar of contemporary American sport ideals and athletic ethical standards (Kusz, p. 159). As a result, Armstrong represents positive Judeo-Christian notions of self (including strength, perseverance, and redemption), all part of muscular Christian ideology, which continue to be transmitted to the general public today.

Other sites of ideology production are also involved in my analysis. For example, the role of Armstrong’s non-profit Foundation implicitly serves to perpetuate positive “love thy neighbor” notions of Judeo-Christian morality (Leviticus, 19:18, p. 64). I also examined the large and diverse amounts of information and support make the Foundation a primary source for cancer related issues. Recent foundation programs have been published on the Web site that involve story-telling, creating a virtual community of other cancer survivors. This virtual community also becomes a physically experienced community at Lance Armstrong Foundation sponsored events, such as “for-cause” rides, walks, and runs. These physical communities also inform my analysis.

Recognizing the continued influence of muscular Christian ideals within contemporary American sport culture is important for any further discussions or understanding about the function of morality or role-model characterizations of athletes. Because contemporary American notions of sport were born from the British muscular Christian movement in the mid-nineteenth century, MacAloon’s work is instrumental in detailing the moral and ethical conversations that persist in contemporary American sport culture. He argued such ideals have become so entrenched in modern sport ideology that they are commonly taken for granted, assumed to be secular, and seldom critiqued. MacAloon states:

Many new developments – from British reaction to the world takeover of cricket by South Asia, to racial integration in British football, to winning the London 2012 Olympic bid that combined classical game – ethic themes such as youth moral development, urban renewal and class peace through sport with the more historically American theme of

immigrant integration and multiculturalism – all suggest a renewed significance and even a certain hidden dependency on muscular Christian ideology (p. 690).

Exploring Armstrong's popular media characterization through various cultural artifacts reveals historical muscular Christian ethical and moral codes continue to be used to describe athletes who conform to the athletic ideal, including notions of success and moral inspiration, physical control and command of the body, protecting the weak, and advancing righteous causes.

### **Muscular Christian Themes Observable in Lance Armstrong**

The case of Lance Armstrong in popular culture demonstrates a perpetuation of muscular Christian hegemony in contemporary American sport. Various examples found in media offer evidence to claims that Armstrong, the sport of cycling, and "for-cause" events (Livingstone, 2010) imbibe muscular Christian themes, premised mostly in how Armstrong's image has been presented to the public as inspirational, global celebrity, cancer-research crusader, and athletic superhero. Because of his cancer survival, highly successful cycling career, and philanthropic endeavors, I wish to focus presently on how Armstrong's popular image clearly displays two muscular Christian themes found in the works of Thomas Hughes: 1.) a body used for the protection of the weak and, 2.) a body used for the advancement of all righteous causes.

#### *Armstrong's Body is Used for the Protection of the Weak*

To understand the manner in which his media image has been constructed to display the theme of protecting the weak, there are four specific areas in which Armstrong can be seen as doing so: as an inspiration (a hero for weak individuals to look up to), through tangible encouragement (giving encouragement to the weak), as a fighter (protect those less strong than him), and through his cycling (to raise money and awareness to issues concerning cancer causes). Each is examined with relation to the writings of Hughes below.

#### Protect as an Inspiration

Armstrong's global impact is well evidenced and is characterized by his inspiration to those who are in need of protection, most specifically cancer patients. In an interview biographer John Wilcockson stated that "in this year's Tour of California, which was in February 2009 he (Wilcockson) would see in every town he went to there would... always be someone from the local community either a cancer victim or cancer survivor or parent of a child who had cancer who he (Armstrong) would meet with and talk with. Not for long but he would always do this" (Meyer, 2009). Wilcockson's sentiments were not unique; the term inspiration is found prolifically in articles and other media about Armstrong. After his first Tour de France victory in 1999 one headline in *Sports Illustrated* read "Austin Power: Armstrong's Victory Inspires Fans Back Home" (CNN/SI, 1999). In this sense the inspirational value of Armstrong is observable as he is depicted using his athleticism and cancer survival to inspire others, to give them hope, and in this sense protect them. Armstrong's inspirational image has spread from his initial cycling Tour wins and cancer crusade focus to various other cultural settings; from inspiring American

soldiers overseas, as Doug Karr (2009) and ‘Sir Isaac’ (2009) document, to articles about “Heroes & Icons” by Bill Saporito (2004) in *Time* magazine. These media depictions discuss his protective nature in terms of giving hope and inspiration through his effort on and off a bicycle. Armstrong has appeared on the covers of *Success* (Yeager, 2009) and *Fortune* (Daniels, 2004) magazines, and he was a featured guest of Michael J. Fox (2009) on an ABC (American Broadcast Company) special titled “Adventures of an Incurable Optimist” (Danner, 2009). Armstrong’s inspiration and message has been captured in the PBS (Public Broadcasting System) children’s animated television series, *Arthur* (Moore, 2008), as well as on popular adult sitcoms like NBC’s (National Broadcasting Company) *The Office* (Stupnitsky and Eisenberg 2006). Armstrong has also been the muse of modern artist Shepard Fairey (Anonymous, 2009) who used his likeness and popular image for large murals on the sides of buildings, accompanied by words of inspiration like “defiance”, “courage”, “action” and “hope rides again.”

In the initial *Sports Illustrated* (1999) magazine coverage of his Tour victory, Karl Haussmann, director of the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) at the time notes Armstrong’s initial inspirational effect, saying “this is a guy who we saw with no hair, lying in bed barely able to move after brain surgery, and now he’s won cycling’s greatest race” (CNN/SI, *Austin Power*). In the same article it was noted that local Austin fans left messages at Armstrong’s Foundation door after he won the 1999 Tour, one of which read “Keep rolling Lance, You are an inspiration”(CNN/SI, *Austin Power*). Also, countless *YouTube* video’s exist in which individuals construct their own tributes to Armstrong, blending inspirational music with images and video footage of the cyclist. Evidence such as this displays the vast magnitude in which Armstrong has come to embody inspirational traits and thereby protect the weak.

### Protect Through Encouragement

Armstrong’s media image also continues to perpetuate the theme of protecting the weak through public and private encouragement. Every few days, either Armstrong or the LAF *Twitter* page posts an individual’s name and sentimental comment about someone who has passed away or has succeeded in surviving cancer. Biographer John Wilcockson (2009) states that:

Ever since he has won his own battle with cancer, Lance has quietly helped hundreds; maybe thousands, of people cope with cancer through his visits, phone calls, e-mails, letters, and signed photos. Most of these people are strangers to him, who have on their own or through friends reached out for his help. And no matter how demanding his schedule, he always finds time to talk at length to a patient with terminal cancer or write an inspirational message that will be read at a memorial service for someone he’s never met (p. 359).

Lance Armstrong (2003) said of his Foundation in an annual report, “The idea of living strong is more than a few words in a mission statement...” It is “supporting innovative community programs to funding cutting edge research to focusing public awareness and public policy on the needs of millions of cancer survivors” (p. 4). It also seems that Armstrong’s efforts to protect others through encouragements are working. The late Elizabeth Edwards states:

Go to a LIVESTRONG summit and you'll see how important he and his organization are to people across the country. This is their lifeline, where they go for information, where they go for support; and if you're going for wide and deep impact, I think he's really found the perfect match with his skill set and his appeal." (Wilcockson, 2009, p. 362)

Prior to the 2009 Tour De France, the LAF Web page aired several personal stories about others who have dealt with cancer. Nearly twenty short video clips of personal stories were available on the LAF homepage, and could also be accessed when visiting Nike's home Web page. These segments are designed to encourage viewers to learn as much as they could about cancer. Written accounts were continually updated on the web site, submitted by individuals who had the opportunity to share their stories with others. The theme of these stories was to illustrate how the LAF helped individuals deal with, beat, and succeed in life after cancer, all of which was connected to Armstrong as a protector of the weak through encouragement.

### Protection through Fighting

As evidenced above Armstrong's image been depicted as protective through inspiration and encouragement, a key aspect of which comes through the notion of fighting. When Armstrong returned to the sport of cycling in 2009, in a well publicized retort to an Irish reporter, he clearly states that he was back "to fight this disease" (manu066, 2009). Armstrong has also stated that when he "fought" his own cancer he felt the existing cancer related resources were insufficient and decided to launch a Foundation of his own to help other cancer victims. He says, "All I knew was that I felt I had a mission to serve others that I'd never had before, and I took it more seriously than anything in the world" (Armstrong, p. 156). Armstrong's fight is apparent in his Foundation's manifesto: *We believe unity is strength, knowledge is power and attitude is everything*. Operating as a creed, Armstrong's various Foundation endeavors reflect his desire to "fight against cancer." As a muscular Christian theme, fighting is detailed by Hughes' in *Tom Brown's School Days* about when fighting is appropriate or not:

As to fighting, keep out of it if you can, by all means. When the time comes, if it ever should, that you have to say 'Yes' or 'No' to a challenge to fight, say 'No' if you can – only take care you make it clear to yourselves why you say 'No'. It's a proof of the highest courage, if done from true Christian motives. It's quite right and justifiable, if done from a simple aversion to physical pain and danger. But don't say 'No' because you fear a licking, and say or think it's because you fear God, for that's neither Christian nor honest. And if you do fight, fight it out; and don't give in while you can stand and see. (p. 232)

As it was an important theme to portray Jesus as a tough guy, the fighting element of muscular Christianity was "to protect and defend the weak against the bullies of the world" (MacAloon, 2006, p. 689). In this sense we see Armstrong and his foundation's efforts reflecting this muscular Christian theme of fighting to protect those who may be bullied.

"By fighting" Armstrong (2000) means, "arm yourself with all the available information, get sound opinions, third opinions, and fourth opinions. Understand what has invaded your body,

and what the possible cures are. It's another fact of cancer that the more informed and empowered patient has a better chance of long-term survival" (p. 273). Through his written work and philanthropic efforts Armstrong fights for those who seek protection, specifically those who have been affected by cancer.

The description provided here, is also reflective of Armstrong's persona and media characterization. In multiple Nike commercials (*Magnet*, 2004 and *Driven*, 2009) he is portrayed as an intense fighter; a fighter for his life (over cancer), a fighter in his sport to be the best, and a fighter for others (through his Foundation). In one specific Nike commercial where famous athletes are depicted engaging in other sports than what they are known for, he is depicted as a pugilist (Lance "Big Tex" Armstrong) in a boxing ring (electrodude1337, 2006). Armstrong's media characterization depicts his willingness to continue to fight for others. The Lance Armstrong Foundation, Nike television commercials, and "for-cause" charity events all stem from his desire to fight for those who need protection, a theme clearly found in muscular Christian ideology.

### Protect By Riding

A fourth examination of the muscular Christian theme of protecting the weak is observable through Armstrong's physical efforts and endeavors as well as media depictions on his bicycle. Through various Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) media efforts and advertisements, usually (but not always) Armstrong is the spokesperson, focusing on the support and inspiration his LIVESTRONG efforts provide. Accompanying his 2009 return to professional cycling and aired just prior to the Tour De France, Nike produced a television commercial clearly demonstrating Armstrong's reasons of returning to the sport. Nike and LIVESTRONG are synonymous in the commercial titled "Driven" where the text voices Armstrong's purpose for his return (Wieden+Kennedy, 2009). The commercial is premised on the notion that Armstrong is not returning for himself but is riding for the sake of others and cancer issues, reflecting the muscular Christian ideology of protecting the weak. This commercial sought to bring awareness to his Foundation and portrayed a protective rationale for returning, while also rebuffing selfish reasons some in the media had claimed about his return (Blackistone, 2009; Gifford, 2009).

The background images in this commercial focus on cancer patients either in treatment or rehab, all filmed in black and white, while Armstrong is interjected riding his bicycle in brilliant color. His voice is accompanied by the song "Auto Rock" by the band Wogwai (2006), beginning with a slow playing piano tempo. Armstrong pronounces: "The critics say I'm arrogant, a dooper, washed up, a fraud, that I couldn't let it go." As the music becomes faster, and the patients are shown to be moving out of bed and into active rehab, he continues; "They can say whatever they want. (pause). I'm not back on my bike for them" (Wieden+Kennedy, 2009). The commercial ends zooming in on Armstrong's determined face as he rides, and the words *Just Do It* flash on screen followed the Nike Swoosh logo. This commercial reinforces the notion that Lance Armstrong was no longer on a personal quest for victory, but is involved in an effort to continue

to bring attention to cancer treatment and his Foundation in an effort to help others. The statement of his selfless sacrifice and riding for others are deep and pronounced. Not only is Armstrong going to suffer physically by riding again, but he does so willingly to inspire, fight for, and protect those weaker than himself, again supporting a muscular Christian value.

Within the context of all these stories it is observable that Armstrong operates as the figure that inspires, fights, and gives hope to those affected by cancer. Through this evidence I see Armstrong reflecting this theme found in Hughes' muscular Christian ideology of using his body for the protection of the weak. While Armstrong clearly represents this central muscular Christian theme, his image as an athlete hero-role model also supports another of Hughes' central muscular Christian ideology: The body is used for the advancement of all righteous causes.

### *The Body is Used for the Advancement of All Righteous Causes*

The second muscular Christian theme I wish to focus on involves the use of the physical body to advance all righteous causes. While an elaboration of what Hughes meant by "all righteous causes" would be interesting, it would detract from the current focus of the present article. Suffice to say, I believe Hughes would agree that the efforts to treat, help, and find cures for those affected by cancer falls under the category of a righteous cause. As my study demonstrates Armstrong is a contemporary American hero athlete that reflects this theme of advancing righteous causes. Armstrong's desire to create his own cancer focused foundation stemmed from his dissatisfaction with other national cancer organizations during his own cancer experience. He felt these other organizations were not very helpful or informative and he believed that he could provide a better resource center for cancer related issues (Wilcockson, 2009, p. 236). To me, this initiative on Armstrong's part to create something better also demonstrates his competitiveness. He felt underserved by what was available to him as a cancer patient, and this competitiveness element, essential to the very idea that is sport, and also central to muscular Christianity, emerged. Ladd and Mathisen (1999) support this, stating that in the United States muscular Christian ideals were helpful for the "socialization into competitive society" which assumes "the presence of activists who pursued innovation and change" (p. 18). Armstrong's act of creating his own foundation to better serve the cancer community reflects this "activist" aim of muscular Christian ideology. In the American ethos, hard work and competition on the field is also considered valuable "off the field." Muscular Christian values are at play as we often hear of athletes like Armstrong competing in other, non-athletic activities, suggesting that competitiveness is a positive trait learned through sport and transferable to other life activities. Prior to his advancement of cancer related causes however, Armstrong demonstrated efforts toward other causes, a common trend among many of today's professional athletes, perhaps displaying the deeper influence of muscular Christian values in athletics in general.

After his bout with cancer and his return to cycling, Armstrong's initial 'cause' related efforts were directed at saving the sport of cycling from its drug centered reputation. Wilcockson (2009) states that in 1999 Armstrong was determined to save the drug tarnished image of the



Tour de France, not cancer patients (p. 270-71). In 1998, the Tour before Armstrong's return, the first and second place finishers tested positive for performance enhancing substances during the race, negating their victories. As Armstrong took the top podium place in 1999 *Sports Illustrated* published an article about Armstrong's Tour victory, alluding to his "savior-like" image for the sport and the Tour's drug image. The article discusses that "many feared the drug scandal that haunted last year's Tour would emerge again. Fans had grown weary of the corrupted sport. And then came Lance Armstrong. The American's comeback captivated the world, and saved cycling" (CNN/SI: *The Tour's Cure*). In an odd twist of irony, Armstrong, who wanted to save the race from being associated with performance enhancing substances, became a central figure in doping allegations (*Reuters*, 8/24/2005; Anonymous, 2006, p. 120; Leicester, 2008; *Associated Press*, 3/18/2009; Brinkley, 2008; Boulanger, 2009).

After his initial Tour victory and beyond the cycling world Armstrong has been able to capitalize and use his celebrity for the advancement of other beneficial human and environmental causes. With the substantial rise in cycling popularity during his career, Armstrong has advanced physical exercise and cycling popularity in the United States. For example, because of Armstrong's return, *Versus* network saw a 77% increase in viewership in the first 10 stages of the 2009 Tour over the same time of the 2008 race (Reynolds, 2009). Additionally, Armstrong's support of more bike lanes has helped change the landscape of many American communities (Stein, 2008). Many medical journal articles, using Armstrong as an example, discuss the positive benefits of including physical activity as a way to stay healthy, even during cancer treatment (Mead, 2006; *Medicalnewstoday.com*, 2006; Entenmann, 2006; Ganz, 2005; Ulman, 2008). As a result of his inspirationally significant image, Armstrong's foundation provides opportunities for individuals to engage and participate in "for-cause" athletic charity events, demonstrating an advancement of philanthropic and physically beneficial causes. As evidence, during the summer of 2009 Armstrong's foundation organized a schedule of "for-cause" events called The LIVESTRONG Challenge – literally a tour of physical-activity events to raise awareness and money for cancer – which were held in Seattle, San Jose, Philadelphia, and Austin. Combined, these events included more than 20,000 participants, volunteers, and organizers raising more than \$10 million for cancer research.

Armstrong's leadership for other causes beyond cycling is well evidenced, yet he has mainly sought to effect positive social change through his cancer Foundation. After Armstrong's retirement from cycling in 2005, he turned his efforts "to the high-profile life he led as an icon in the cancer community and as an A-list celebrity...Lance focused on promoting cancer awareness: He spoke at fundraisers; participated in charity bike rides and marathons; visited with cancer patients; and even courted presidential candidates to advocate for more research dollars for cancer" (Wilcockson, 2009, p. 4). As scholars in the field of celebrity, Ingham, Loy, and Swetman (1979) suggest Armstrong was able to transform his celebrity to become a leading advocate for cancer issues precisely because of his athletic successes. One of the most observable cultural artifacts which display Armstrong's advancement of righteous causes is the LIVESTRONG brand that has come to embody positive social meaning in a variety of ways.

## LIVESTRONG

The term LIVESTRONG has become synonymous with the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) since its beginnings in 1997. Today, the LIVESTRONG brand is displayed on athletic apparel, backpacks, sunglasses, computer cases, bicycles, bicycle helmets, and wristbands. The LIVESTRONG campaign also has been broadcast through a myriad of commercial and online manifestations. *Facebook*, the online networking server, includes a page dedicated to what ‘LIVESTRONG’ means to those who belong to the “LIVESTRONG and the Lance Armstrong Foundation” group. This group was created on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009. As of January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010, nineteen posts had been made. Some of the sentiments include:

To me, LIVESTRONG is about attitude . It's about living live to the fullest , making the most of the opportunitites , always being positive even during the bad times & when you are faced with a challenge in life you face it head on & fight to very the end.

LIVESTRONG is... when things get hard in sport or in sickness that you can't stop, won't stop, never stop.

LIVESTRONG means everything. It's an attitude, a philosophy, a feel-better-cause. It keeps me on my bike, and on my own life-track, in every situation in life! The yellow bracelet is my everyday fellow and I am happy to be a healthy person who can give some of my energy to others! It keeps me thinking and stops me from being blinded by illusions.

I really appreciate all LIVESTRONG supporters and the Foundation itself goes for and would like to thank you! Carpe Diem!

LiveStrong is to live thru cancer, and if possible, beyond. To grab life by the balls and live it to the full. To appreciate all that is good in life and not dwell on the bad stuff, as, as a survivor, i know i shouldn't be here. Thats what LiveStrong means to me.

(<http://www.facebook.com/#/topic.php?uid=2210444098&topic=7639>)

In these responses we see the strong emphasis on advancing goodness in the world and display how others view Armstrong and understand the term LIVESTRONG in their lives. To help advance the agenda of the Foundation, the LAF refers to those who follow and participate in their cause The LIVESTRONG Army. This ‘army’ includes the thousands of volunteers that help organize and run LIVESTRONG events such as annual LIVESTRONG rides for cancer awareness. Understanding the muscular Christian value of advancing righteous causes, Armstrong’s efforts are meant to inspire his fans to be like him; to go out into the world to help others and continue whatever they decide LIVESTRONG means in their lives. While perhaps athletes in the past wanted their fans to “be like them” through purchasing merchandise with their logo on it, Armstrong seems to be different. His messages, observable through various examples in the media is to LIVESTRONG like him, not as an athlete per se, but rather by going

into the world and help others, especially cancer patients. One visible example of the advancement of the LAF's cancer cause that is culturally significant are the commercially successful yellow LIVESTRONG bracelet.

### The Yellow LIVESTRONG Bracelet

In an effort to raise money for his Foundation, Nike and the Lance Armstrong Foundation launched a campaign that took the righteous LIVESTRONG cause and sold it directly to the consumer. The \$1 yellow bracelets were sold individually in Nike Stores beginning in the summer of 2004. Part of Nike's aim at launching the bracelet during the summer of 2004 was to get Olympic athletes to wear them at the Athens games (Mickle 9/18/2009). In addition to raising \$25.1 million within six months for cancer research, the bands became a symbol of cancer awareness. In the past eight years, the yellow bracelet has come to be a symbol and mantra encouraging individuals through a myriad of personal manifestations, no longer solely associated with cancer. Tripp Mickle (2009) has commented on the success of the bracelet, exploring its usefulness for logo recognition and inherent meaning. "A study commissioned by the foundation in 2005 showed that 53 percent of adults were familiar with the name LIVESTRONG and 96 percent of those were aware of its connection to Lance Armstrong. Of the people familiar with the brand 80 percent associated it with inspiration, 70 percent with cancer and 41 percent with living each day to the fullest" (9/18/2009). The term LIVESTRONG takes on new meaning as people purchase the bracelet and live out the words as they see fit. Close friends to Armstrong acknowledged that people have reinterpreted the slogan to fit their own purposes, regardless of their connection to cancer. Bill Stapleton said in 2009 some people buy the wristband "because their uncle has cancer, but there was this broader group that wanted to quit smoking, wanted to exercise, wanted to be a better parent – and the band reminds them of that" (Mickle, 9/14/2009). Initially intended to raise money and cancer awareness, the yellow bracelets have evolved to become a highly recognizable cultural symbol for those living with cancer, those who have been touched by cancer, or those in support of finding a cure. It has also taken on a variety of meanings for millions of others who purchased the bracelet. By wearing the yellow band, individuals can directly support Armstrong's advancement of righteous causes and participate in a philanthropic community (Gladden and Funk, 2004).

The yellow bracelet is also an indicator of contemporary American consumptive culture where individuals believe that by purchasing and wearing the band they have a sense of helping a cause (Livingstone, 2010; Glouberman and Riccio, 2010). The yellow LIVESTRONG bracelets began an avalanche of replicas, for various causes, since 2004. From the war effort in Iraq, to green pro-environment bands many organizations have used wrist bands to promote causes. Cultural popularity deems certain activities (because of influential media coverage) worthy of financial and personal investment. But just giving support is not enough in contemporary America; something needs to reflect that you give. Other examples of this include pink ribbons for breast cancer (King, 2006), red ribbons for AIDS (Sontag, 1979; Dyer, 2006), and even 'Jesus fish' car decals (Drury, 2009). The purchasing of the bracelet allows many to feel as if

they are “doing good” for others. They support a cause, an ideal and this makes them feel good about themselves and about others who they see wearing the bracelet. They see themselves living a certain life that gives them identity and meaning. Ladd and Mathisen (1999) also suggest this was an important element of late nineteenth century American muscular Christianity due in part to the “succession of revivals that propelled the social phenomenon of sport beyond the character-development ideology to take on the added goal of making the ‘bad of society good’” (p. 13). The yellow bracelet makes individuals feel connected to others in their community and creates a belief that they are acting in accordance with the prescribed actions of bettering themselves and those around them, making the bad of society good, and advancing righteous causes. A marketing officer for a nationwide athletic apparel store has said of the LIVESTRONG bracelet, “it’s not an apparel and footwear brand. It’s a movement and a cause around which people have great passion” (Mickle, 9/14/2009).

The use of Armstrong’s public battle with the disease has made him the poster child for advancing successful cancer related for-cause efforts. The Lance Armstrong Foundation has had a real world impact as well, when on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008 as a result of the work done by the Foundation and other organizations the “Caroline Pryce Walker Conquer Childhood Cancer Act” was passed by President George W. Bush significantly increasing the amount of federal dollars spent on childhood cancer research. With Armstrong persistently advocating for cancer research funds, and taking bicycle rides with Presidents to push this legislation, it is clear that Armstrong embodies an athlete who advances righteous causes. The yellow bracelets and the slogan LIVESTRONG, both associated with Armstrong and his Foundation, have come to take on a variety of “righteous cause” meanings for millions of band wearers. In this sense Armstrong’s advancement of the cancer-cause has influenced other causes. There is no limit to how far LIVESTRONG extends into other righteous causes and thus he may actually advance many more than originally intended clearly supporting the muscular Christian theme of advancing all righteous causes.

### **Conclusion**

Lance Armstrong represents a contemporary iconic athletic figure that clearly reveals two fundamental muscular Christian themes described in the work of Thomas Hughes (1861). Armstrong as an athlete and as a culturally constructed hero icon embodies themes of protecting the weak and advancing righteous causes. His bout with cancer is a well documented and inspiring story that has influenced the way he has been characterized in popular media. His desire to ride again and support beneficial social efforts has inspired others to do the same. These muscular Christian themes have intimately been woven into his commercialized image. However, the larger American and global social context in which sport exists today is vastly different from mid-nineteenth century British and American athletic cultures. While protecting the weak and advancing righteous causes are overwhelmingly apparent, Armstrong would not be an ideal example of a muscular Christian for Thomas Hughes for two main reasons.

Firstly, while muscular Christian themes are still observable in modern sport characters like Armstrong, his religious affiliation is not clearly defined as Christian as it would have been in the nineteenth century muscular Christian framework. His real life religious convictions are *wishy-washy* (not unique in contemporary American culture) but his media characterization perpetuates themes inherent to muscular Christianity. It also means that in contemporary American sport culture, the athlete can come to assume themes of moral and ethical significance without actually stating any religious convictions or affiliations. Muscular Christianity, as it was founded, very much included notions of being physically active to serve a Christian theological effort. Armstrong's positive social influence as a moral hero-athlete involve his beliefs and ideals (which many find to be good and moral) but do not include any firm religious or theological foundations (Christian or otherwise).

Secondly, God does not enter into Armstrong's media description, which was also an essential element of nineteenth century muscular Christianity. The erasure or exclusion of God in contemporary American hero-athlete characterizations is no new discovery, but the persistence of muscular Christian ideals in these characterizations is an interesting condition leading one to better understand how sport and athletes can come to embody ethical and moral significance. Jeffrey Mahan (2005), in describing what most American "intuitively" understand to be religion (organized devotional practices focused on a concept of God or gods), suggests that cultural studies scholars will continue to "discover a variety of relationships between religion and popular culture" (p. 288-9). Furthermore, Mahan states participants in modern forms of popular culture "write themselves into" events, "through their activity...wearing costumes, belonging to fan clubs, attending conventions, memorizing lore, and even creating and enacting their own tales" (p. 289-90). Followers of Armstrong write themselves into his agenda and events by wearing the yellow bracelet, reading his books, following him on the Tour de France, through his various social networks (*Twitter*), and participating at LAF sponsored events. Armstrong's story and philanthropy perpetuated through media, reflects a larger condition of contemporary American culture that has removed notions of God from daily activities and replaced it with sport as a pseudo-religious experience. Radical Orthodoxy scholar John Milbank (1993) states religion fulfills certain social and personal needs for all humans and "given this more complex picture, one has to revise the presentation of the way in which 'religion' intervenes in 'society' for American sociology" (p. 109). Future studies may examine how Armstrong's image and philanthropy have spiritual and religious meaning for people in contemporary times. It is arguable that based on muscular Christian themes and social assumptions about sport and athletes, the actions of Lance Armstrong and his Foundation come to be deemed "good" and reflective of positive social elements through his popular cultural image. Although muscular Christian themes historically included notions of God, cases such as his reveal a larger condition of contemporary American culture that has removed notions of a transcendent being and made the individual person divine and holy.

While Lance Armstrong would not be considered a muscular Christian as it was originally developed, his public character embodies vestigial elements of several muscular

Christian themes in their contemporary manifestations. The success and popularity of the Lance Armstrong Foundation perpetuates Armstrong's image, not only as a cyclist, but also as a philanthropic and beneficent human being. Millions are diagnosed with cancer every year around the globe, and billions are affected. Armstrong has been depicted in popular culture as a hero-athlete and based on this designed a widely successful Foundation that has been highly successful in attracting supporters. His continued efforts, coupled with the commercialization efforts of Nike and his Foundation, along with his continued cycling successes, keep his agenda popular. While Armstrong is not a savior per se, his commercial image depicts him as someone with spiritual and religious significance premised on hegemonic muscular Christian themes that permeate contemporary American sport culture.

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